

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

Media Office

Democratic Caucus

John Schorg, Director

Statehouse, Room 157

Indianapolis, Indiana 46204

1-800-382-9842 or 1-317-232-9621

Fax Number: 1-317-232-9792

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STATEHOUSE REPORT FROM REP. DAVE CROOKS

INDIANAPOLIS – Facing a long list of items to consider and a short time in which to consider them, lawmakers returned to the Statehouse this week for the 2006 session of the Indiana General Assembly.

This is the short session of the Legislature, with our work to be completed by mid-March. Ideally, this session is supposed to be devoted only to those matters that are believed to be emergencies. The problem is that there are a lot of emergencies that need to be addressed, many of which have come about because of actions legislators took in 2005.

The chief concern expressed on both sides of the aisle is property taxes. As I predicted last spring, the biennial state budget approved by the majorities in the House and Senate and signed into law by the governor contained large property tax increases and cuts in funding for public schools. Now members of the majority have seen the light, and have expressed an interest in doing something to help families and business owners with property taxes.

How will that be done? House Democrats have proposed using a portion of the \$255 million collected from the recent tax amnesty toward property tax relief. The governor wants to use that amnesty money to build up the state's budget surplus. I think it seems fair to use some of it to give relief to well-deserving Hoosiers who have paid their taxes on time, but have seen their property taxes go up.

Rather than discussing actual property tax relief, some influential lawmakers and the governor appear more interested in plans that give local units of government the ability to enact local option taxes, with the idea that this revenue will be used to cut property taxes. There are some who view this plan as yet another tax increase, with no real relief coming in return for home and business owners.

We also will see more debate on the question of time in Indiana. While the governor succeeded in his plans to bring daylight-saving time to our state, he failed to do anything to address the question of whether Indiana should be in the Central or Eastern Time Zone.

I have filed a bill that would place the time zone question up for consideration in a statewide referendum. While there is reluctance on the part of the governor and some legislative leaders to debate this issue, I believe the vast majority of people in Indiana want a chance to decide on a time zone for Indiana, and the referendum provides the best way to settle the issue.

Government services will receive close scrutiny in the 2006 session. The Daniels Administration has made no secret about its desire to sell some programs and operations – such as the Indiana Toll Road, state hospitals and parks, and handling eligibility claims for health care services – to private companies, many from outside Indiana and the U.S.

One such program is "Major Moves," the governor's plan to spend \$10.6 billion on road construction projects over the next decade, including the extension of Interstate 69 in southwest Indiana. The proposal would call for a private investor to build the extension, which would become a toll road. I will continue to support construction of I-69 in southwest Indiana, but I have heard from a number of concerned citizens who are not comfortable with paying tolls to drive on the road, especially when those tolls could be going to foreign investors.

The merits of privatization remain to be discussed on the floors of the Indiana House and Senate, and I will refrain

from offering my support until I am educated about the safeguards that the administration intends to have to protect Hoosiers from fee and toll increases for these services.

There are legitimate concerns that privatization will result in lost jobs and state tax dollars leaving Indiana, and I want to make sure that lawmakers have the kind of oversight that will prevent such things from happening.

Education will remain a concern in 2006. As we look for ways to provide more assistance for schools that were forced to lay off teachers and cut programs by the majority's state budget, we will consider the governor's proposal to put more money in the classroom. Details are sketchy, but at least one component of the plan calls for joint purchasing of items like school buses. There also has been some discussion of keeping the school year between Labor Day and June 1, but I want to see how such a move will affect the state requirement of 180 days of student instruction.

In the weeks to come, I will be talking about these issues and many others in greater detail. It looks to be an active session, and I haven't even talked about matters like legalizing video gaming, teaching intelligent design, consolidating of school corporations, eliminating some county and township offices and reopening license branches. Before closing this week's Report, I want to mention two House members who passed away recently: Tiny Adams, who represented the people of Muncie and Delaware County in the 34th House District, and Jim Bottorff, who served the 71st House District along the Ohio River near Louisville. These men demonstrated the best qualities of a state legislator, particularly in their devotion to helping the people in their districts. We will remember them fondly, and welcome their replacements: Carlene Bottorff in the 71st District and Dennis Tyler in the 34th District.

I have gained additional responsibilities for the upcoming session. The Speaker has appointed me as ranking Democrat on the House Utilities and Energy Committee.

Throughout the 2006 session, I hope you will stay in touch with me to provide your comments and concerns about issues before the Legislature. There are three easy ways to contact me.

You can call me on the toll-free Statehouse telephone number of 1-800-382-9842.

You can e-mail me through my Internet Web site at www.IN.gov/H63.

If you prefer the old-fashioned approach, you can write to me at:

State Rep. Dave Crooks
200 W. Washington St.
Indianapolis, IN 46204

I look forward to hearing from you.

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